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ABSTRACT

Examples of rural poor people in the Southwest are cited to point out the disadvantages with which this group must cope. Educational disadvantages suffered by the rural student are indicated. Exemplary projects developed in problem areas identified by the Bureau of Educational Personnel Development are indicated as a means of bringing about needed changes in school programs to give them relevance even in a multi-cultural community. (SW)

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THE RURAL POOR AND E.P.D.A.[1]

Sylvester A. Baca

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[1]Presentation made at the 63rd Annual American Vocational [redacted] Boston, Massachusetts on December 8, 1969. Ass'n. Meeting

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In these days of growing cultural awareness, it gives me a great deal of pleasure to share with you some of the uniqueness of the tri-cultural land of the Southwest. This is the land of ancient Indian Pueblos, old Mexican villages, and newer communities of other ethnic groups, loosely referred to as Anglos. It is also an area of the Country where you are daily made aware of the rural poor and the disadvantaged.

Let me give you three examples of the rural poor in the Southwest: Lawrence Charlie, a fifteen year old Navajo, Lolita Torres, a twelve year old third generation Mexican-American, and John Markham, fifteen year old Anglo, are three young citizens of the rural poor population. These are not typical examples, but neither are they atypical.

Lawrence Charlie lives with his parents on a southwestern reservation, forty miles from the high school where he is a sophomore. He lives in a Hogan which is a one room hut made of logs, mud and grass. He has a difficult time preparing lessons because it it always crowded after dark, and has only one kerosene lamp. His father is self-employed; he owns a herd of sheep. Lawrence often has to miss school to help with the herd or to help pick piñion nuts in the fall. The piñions supplement their income. He also misses school during inclement weather because the

bus that takes him to the main highway does not run. He is often frustrated by the fact that if he goes along with the acculturation oriented program the school imposes on him, he is ostricized by his home and community; if he does not, he is doomed to a life of poverty.

Lolita Torres lives in a southwestern village with her father, mother, and three brothers. In March she is taken out of school because her family pools resources with two other families to do farm work. They will travel in a remodled flatbed truck without the aid of a credit card all the way to Michigan using service station restroom and camping in roadside rest areas. The entire Torres family will work at planting, thinning and hoeing beets. Between hoeings they will move up into the thumb of Michigan to pick cherries; then to Ohio to pick tomatoes and other garden crops. It will be late in September or early October before Lolita returns to school.

Jack Markham is a student in a rural southwestern School District; there are only sixty-seven (67) students in the high school. Efforts have been made to consolidate with a larger school district, however, this has been met with resistance. The only Vocation Education Course taught in the school is Vocational Agriculture. Even if other courses were offered, Jack would not be urged to take them. His parents are semi-literate farmers, and their aspiration for Jack is that he "make a good hand" at a fifteen ($15.00) dollar a day farm laborer's job, and that he has access to

seasonal employment with the local school, cotton gin, mercantile, or grain elevator. Jack's ultimate goal is to some day acquire his own farm and be in business for himself.

Many efforts are being made to fight poverty and to relieve the lot of the educationally disadvantaged, yet somehow the disadvantage of the rural student is generally overlooked.

Today approximately 15 million children 18 years of age and under are enrolled in rural public schools. This includes the major part of the 142,000 Indian students, and vast numbers of the Black and Mexican-American students. These generally small schools are quite often isolated from population centers and, contrary to popular myths, rural education is not diminishing. Even though we are aware of the many improvements that have been made by consolidation and other token efforts, there are still many small rural schools and they are usually inadequate because of their isolation from centers of social change and lack of comprehensiveness.

There is also a scarcity of good teachers for isolated schools. They usually have trouble attracting and holding competent teachers. Facilities, materials, and instructional equipment in small schools are generally viewed as being inadequate. Also, lack of activities, distance from institutiions of higher education, and lack of adequate supervision are among other reasons why teachers do not prefer small school assignments.

Vocational-Technical education has received little attention. This is the area of the curriculum that is particularly deficient in small rural schools. There is a lack of qualified teaching personnel, obsolete or little equipment and facilities, little money, and limited community resources. Generally the limited academic and vocational preparation of rural small school students continues to contribute to the swelling numbers of the marginally employed, the underemployed, and the unemployed.

Generally, the citizen of the rural area is employed in seasonal, marginal employment at menial tasks and often is forced to be a migrant worker on farms across the country. He may also do other seasonal work such as the railroad track or highway construction. The children in the rural community put in a long school day; often two or three hours on the bus plus six hours of classes. They often enroll late in the Fall and leave early in the Spring. They are subjected to a curriculum that is nothing more than a replica of that existing in the urbanized college prep School. They are isolated by distance, rough terrain, culture, tradition and ties to the land. Inovative programs oriented to individualized instruction are urgently needed in the small school setting, however, they should be tested where they will be used.

The rural citizen is usually poor, but he has pride and most important of all an identity; he knows who he is, and this identity is based on a family name and locality where he lives. Many of these low income rural families have children that attend schools where the academic achievement of the pupil tends to be below the national average. Within the family itself, the father's roll is predominant. The church is the center of the rural community. However, when these families move into the urban area, they usually end up in the inner city, becoming displaced persons and religious controls then begin to break down. Lack of education or skills often prevent them from obtaining jobs, consequently they live in crowded conditions in sub-standard housing. It is difficult for these people to adjust to urban life.

It is hoped that the exemplary projects that will be developed in the problem areas identified by the Bureau of Educational Personnel Development will help to alleviate the painful shortage of qualified personnel at all levels in vocational education, and that it will open up opportunities to bring about a better integration of vocational and academic education. This will provide a means to bring about certain needed changes in school programs to give them relevance. It will provide the means for exemplary projects that will develop models for the small rural school. Perhaps

improvements are forthcoming in a mobile classroom that will provide individualized instruction while transporting students to and from school as part of the regular school day.

It is envisioned that when this seed has multiplied, we will have area vocational education integrated with relevant college preparatory education at all levels throughout the Country. This system will offer a wide range of courses, supplied with up-to-date equipment, staffed with competent teachers that will have available an in-service program to help them keep up with current educational and technical changes.

For over 200 years we have been preparing teachers and writing curricula to deliberately eliminate sub-cultures and mold the members into the dominant culture. The Indians, Mexican-Americans, and other minority ethnic groups liked to bring their culture to school with them, but they were not allowed to do so. They were stripped of their culture in the same fashion an interrogator in a prisoner of war camp strips a prisoner of his clothing.

In the last decade there has appeared on the scene another school of thought: And I am asking, could this be the way? That we do everything possible to support and nourish sub-cultures with an ultimate objective that there

will eventually be a gestalt of all the cultures, and yet preserve the essence of each, so that the members of every sub-culture are developing their identity with the dominant culture without losing their own identity. In this vein, we then might say to members of minority ethnic groups, "we like your culture, we like your family, please feel free to bring them to school with you."

EPDA has provisions to recruit, train and retrain personnel in Vocational and Technical Education fields. This will certainly include teachers, counselors and administrators of all minority ethnic groups that can possibly better relate to these disadvantaged individuals. These provisions will also help them to become community leaders instead of complacent victims of a political structure. Instead of teachers trying to resolve their proplems within the narrow confines of this structure they will work along legitimate channels to gradually change it to better ends.

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